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RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0063  
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SUBJECT: CONGRESS LOSES ITS MAJORITY IN ASSAM STATE ASSEMBLY AND THE MUSLIM VOTE

REF: A) CALCUTTA 0195 B) CALCUTTA 0145 C) CALCUTTA 0134 D) CALCUTTA 0071

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The May 11 state assembly election results returned a diminished Congress Party to power in Assam that must now rule in a coalition with the tribal Bodo People's Progressive Front - Hagrama (BPPF-H). The recently established Muslim party Asom United Democratic Front (AUDF) split the formerly solid Congress Muslim vote and undermined the party's hold in 20 Muslim-dominated constituencies, causing Congress to lose its outright majority. The AUDF had hoped to act as the "kingmaker," but Congress combined its 53 seats with those of the BPPF-H and Independents to form a government. Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi appeared anxious to tie-up with the BPPF-H, as it was willing to let him retain his position in the new government. Gogoi spurned the AUDF as its leaders had publicly opposed his remaining as CM. Gogoi's willingness to rely on a party of former ethnic Bodo militants to retain his position could seriously damage the Congress' long-term prospects in Assam by alienating the Muslim vote and opening the door to greater ethnic violence and corruption. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Assam's May 11 assembly election results left Congress without a clear majority, although it remained the state's largest party with 53 seats in the 126-seat assembly and easily beat its principal rival, the regional Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which won just 24 seats. Congress' weak showing was attributed to its losing control of the key Muslim vote in 20 Muslim-majority assembly constituencies. Businessman Badruddin Ajmal and other Muslim leaders formed the AUDF in late 2005 to tap into Muslim sentiment that Congress was not responsive to the community. Congress, needing the "magic number" 64 to retain power, turned to the BPPF (H) with its 12 seats and to seven independents to form a coalition government. Prior to the elections Congress, anticipating its loss of Muslim votes, made an unofficial arrangement with the tribal BPPF (H), and did not field candidates against it in Bodo-dominated areas.

3. (U) May 11 election results were:  
Congress: 53 (71 in 2001)  
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP): 24 (20 in 2001)  
Asom Gana Parishad - Progressive (AGP-P): 1  
Asom United Democratic Front (AUDF): 10  
Bodoland People's Progressive Front - H (BPPF-H): 12  
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): 10 (8 in 2001)  
Communist Party of India (CPI): 1

Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM): 2  
Nationalist Congress Party (NCP): 1  
Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC): 1  
Others: 11

14. (U) Congress' difficulties with Muslim voters came to the fore in mid-2005, when the Supreme Court ruled that the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDT) was unconstitutional. The IMDT protected illegal Bangladeshi migrants from deportation and Congress' failure to appeal the ruling or to immediately offer alternative legislation was perceived by many in the Muslim community as a failure to protect its interests. Congress finally responded in April 2006 by amending the Foreigners Act of 1946 with the Foreigners Tribunals for Assam Order, effectively replicating the IMDT. However in late 2005, Muslim leaders, who traditionally supported Congress, had already formed the AUDF. Given Assam's Muslim population of 28 percent, the AUDF hoped to do well in the election and play a key role in forming a new government.

15. (SBU) Congress spokesperson B. Sharma (protect) told post that the party would have certainly won an absolute majority had it not been for the AUDF. She maintained that indigenous Muslims voted for Congress, while "Bengali speaking" Muslims most affected by the IMDT repeal voted for the AUDF. Press contacts added that in lower Assam and the Barak Valley areas, where the Bangladeshi presence is higher, most voters preferred the AUDF. However in upper Assam, indigenous Muslims voted mostly for Congress or even the AGP. In as many as 20 constituencies, the division of Muslim votes between Congress and the AUDF resulted in a Congress defeat. The AUDF's 10 seats were clearly won at Congress' expense and the AUDF also came second in at least 12 other districts. (Note: At least 39 of Assam's 126 assembly segments have more than 40 per cent Muslim voters, while in 12 Muslim voters are between 30 and 40 per

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cent.) According to Election Commission figures, Congress won only 28.33 per cent of the total votes and the BJP 10.88 percent. In effect, 60 per cent of votes cast were against national parties Congress and the BJP.

16. (SBU) Even though the AUDF now represents the largest bloc of Muslim votes and many of its leaders and members were former Congress Party members, Gogoi refused to pursue an alliance. Gogoi was clearly motivated by self interest, as AUDF Leader Ajmal had said that he might support the Congress to form a government, but not with Gogoi as Chief Minister. While Gogoi did not want a coalition with the AUDF, the Congress national leadership was reportedly interested in bringing the AUDF back into the fold. An Assam Congress member noted to ConGen that the Congress national leadership had pressured Gogoi to work with the AUDF. Congress leaders are apparently worried that the formation of the AUDF might encouraged Muslims in Uttar Pradesh to launch a similar party, and that Gogoi's rejection of the AUDF would send a negative signal to Muslims in other states.

17. (SBU) However, Gogoi apparently ignored pressure to work with the AUDF and instead put his fate and that of the Congress in the hands of Hagrama Mohilary and his Bodo faction, the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF-H) because the Bodos were willing let Gogoi remain as CM. Mohilary was leader of the militant Bodo Liberation Tigers that disbanded in 2003 with the signing of a peace accord with the GOI. Mohilary emerged as a key Bodo leader in the 2005 local Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council elections. During those elections, Mohilary received Congress support and fielded former BLT militants to contest against official BPPF candidates nominated by his rival faction leader Rabiran Nazary. In the assembly elections, the Congress asked its supporters to vote for the BPPF (H) in Bodo dominated districts. The BPPF(H) has proclaimed that solving the problem of illegal migration into Assam will be a priority for the party because it concerns "all the indigenous people of the state." The BPPF (H) now seeks to portray itself as the champion of Assamese interests in partnership with the Congress, usurping the opposition AGP's role as protector of the Assamese

against foreign (Bangladeshi) influence.

¶8. (SBU) Gogoi's short-term calculus for personal gain in aligning with the BPPF-H could have serious negative long-term repercussions. The BPPF-H has already been accused of corruption in its governance of the Bodoland Council and Congress' support of the BPPF-H against the BPPF-R, in a classic tactic of divide and rule, has exacerbated factional tensions and has led to violence. In a series of incidents involving the two Bodo factions this April, a youth was lynched, a teacher hacked to death, several homes set on fire, and faction members shot.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Congress loss of its majority in the Assam state assembly was a setback. Through judicious negotiation with the AUDF, the Party could have minimized its losses and potentially won back the Muslim vote. Instead, CM Gogoi's chose to save his own political skin at the expense of the Congress Party. Gogoi's alignment with the BPPF reinforced the break with the AUDF and its former Congress members, making any reconciliation with errant Muslims less likely. This has ruined Congress' prospects of uniting the Muslim community behind it. In addition, Gogoi's actions sends a negative signal to other Muslim communities in states like UP that Congress leaders will sacrifice the Muslim vote when politically expedient. Gogoi's favoring of the BPPF-H against the BPPF-R is also fueling factional violence within the Bodo community and further inflaming Assam's simmering ethnic tensions. In saving himself, Gogoi appears to have damned his party.

JARDINE